

VZCZCXRO1214
PP RUEHPB
DE RUEHSV #0185/01 1321538
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 111538Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY SUVA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0524
INFO RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 2025
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0123
RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY 1544
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 0121
RUEHNZ/AMCONSUL AUCKLAND 0646
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY 1056
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0330
RHHJJAA/JICPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000185

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/12/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [CVIS](#) [UN](#) [FJ](#)
SUBJECT: FIJI INTERIM GOVERNMENT SEEKS UN, COMMONWEALTH
ASSISTANCE WITH ELECTORAL REFORM

REF: A. SUVA 155
[1](#)B. SUVA 145 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Fiji's President Iloilo has asked the UN and the Commonwealth for immediate help to create a forum to address reform of Fiji's electoral system in anticipation of elections in 2009. Iloilo seeks funds and expertise. He suggests names for eminent people to oversee the effort, and specifically rejects Sir Paul Reeves, the current Commonwealth envoy to Fiji. We hear Commonwealth SG Sharma is skeptical about Fiji's interim government (IG) and may be inclined to keep Reeves on board. The UN ResRep in Suva reportedly is interested in the idea of UN involvement. We comment that IG efforts to reform Fiji's electoral system to date have failed to achieve buy-in from major players, in particular ethnic-Fijians. We recommend that the USG ask the UN to take care in evaluating any collaboration with the IG on its proposed forum, assessing first if all key parties are prepared to participate and to accept the inevitable election delay that would follow. End summary.

IG asks for UN-Commonwealth joint help on electoral reform

[1](#)2. (SBU) In late April, President Iloilo wrote to UN SYG Ban Ki Moon and Commonwealth SecGen Kamlesh Sharma seeking a joint UN-Commonwealth endeavor to help Fiji reform its electoral system in light of complaints that the current system laid out in the 1997 Constitution is fatally flawed. We e-mailed EAP/ANP copies of the letters on May 5. (See reftels for National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF, People's Charter) complaints about Fiji's electoral system.) Iloilo's letters ask Ban and Sharma to organize assistance "with due speed" to ensure elections take place "as early as possible in 2009." (Note: Interim PM Bainimarama pledged to Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders last October that the IG would hold free and fair elections in March 2009.)

[1](#)3. (SBU) The letters seek a joint UN-Commonwealth "reconnaissance mission" as soon as possible, to be followed by a forum "within the next month or so," backed by appropriate expertise and resources, for all key stakeholders in Fiji to discuss steps needed to achieve reform. The letters propose the UN and Commonwealth appoint, and fund, a three member panel of eminent persons to mediate/facilitate the forum and associated political dialogue. The letters offer three names: former Commonwealth SG Don McKinnon; Dr. Yash Ghai (an authority on constitutions who is very familiar

with Fiji); and former PNG PM and ForMin Rabbie Namaliu. The letter to Sharma suggests the current Commonwealth interlocutor to Fiji, Sir Paul Reeves, is not appropriate for such a role because he helped create the 1997 Constitution. The letter asks the UN and Commonwealth to coordinate closely with the PIF Secretariat and the EU, suggesting both might be observers to the forum and might be tapped for funding and technical support. The letters do not mention the United States.

Commonwealth reaction

14. (C) A Commonwealth representative, Albert Mariner, arrived in Suva late last week to prepare for a visit by Sir Paul Reeves this week. Mariner told us today the Commonwealth SG had not received Iloilo's letter as of last week. In light of the Iloilo letter and another one just received from Bainimarama suggesting that the Reeves visit be postponed, Reeves will not journey to Suva now. Bainimarama indicated he would still welcome Reeves coming to Suva, just at a later date. The Commonwealth is now contemplating next steps. Mariner predicted that McKinnon will not wish to take on a role with the proposed forum; and it is very possible SG Sharma will continue to see Reeves as the Commonwealth's most appropriate interlocutor with Fiji. Mariner foresees Reeves possibly visiting Suva again in early June. Mariner concluded, as have we, that the IG's forum concept appears to be basically a "delaying tactic" intended to push elections off farther into 2009.

The UN view?

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15. (C) We spoke briefly with UN ResRep Dictus last Friday evening. He acknowledged that UN headquarters received Iloilo's letter, and he said he is not at all sure how New York would respond. He indicated a degree of sympathy for the view that the proposed joint UN-Commonwealth effort might be Fiji's best bet to find a peaceful way out of its current problems. Note: Mariner met with Dictus in recent days and came away thinking that Dictus has become aligned with John Samy, mastermind of the NCBBF process and head of the NCBBF secretariat. Reportedly the two have had numerous recent conversations.

Comment

16. (C) As noted in previous reporting, Fiji's Constitution is imperfect, but it was unanimously agreed only eleven years ago after a truly inclusive political process, led initially by Reeves. The post-coup IG's current NCBBF process is not inclusive and not transparent, at least not yet; and it is engineered by Bainimarama and his cohort. If the various political elements in Fiji, in particular the ethnic-Fijians, endorse and agree to participate fully in some sort of IG-created forum to consider electoral reforms, fair enough. To date, though, that has not happened.

17. (C) The variety of political leaders were prepared in March to engage in a political dialogue fostered by Reeves, until Bainimarama and interim Finance Minister Chaudhry declined. The U.S. was on board for that sort of dialogue. However, in the embassy's view, the U.S. should not encourage the new IG effort to rope in the UN and Commonwealth, at least not yet. We propose that Washington suggest to the UN not take the plunge without first carefully testing the waters to ensure all key parties in Fiji are prepared to buy into the process and accept the inevitable electoral delays. It may well be that the IG intent is primarily to create just such delay, realizing most Fiji citizens currently are not happy and would vote against IG politicians. A worry is that the UN's assisting a delay of elections could bring ethnic-Fijian dissidents to the snapping point, spurring violence, rather than helping Fiji find lasting peace.

DINGER